

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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FOR BIRDPWATCHERS

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Editorial:

1. Encyclopedia of Indian Natural History:

Anyone who can afford it must buy the Encyclopedia of Indian Natural History published by the Oxford University Press written by experts for non-experts in unambiguous easy style. Considering the kind of production, the Rs.245/- is not by any means a high price. The entries on the bird sections written mainly by Salim Ali and his trusted colleagues will remain a permanent asset of our bird literature.

Here is a sample on Bird Calls and Songs, written by Dr. Madhav Gadgil:

'Birds, like men, rely on sight and sound. Their unique 'syrinx' allows them a tremendous range of articulation to convey messages to other birds. The bay weaver bird, for instance, uses ten calls in various contexts. Young birds emit begging calls when hungry, and send their parents juvenile location calls when dispersed. Weavers use social contact calls when feeding in flocks, and flight calls for coordination in flight, especially at take off and landing. They emit alarm calls and mobbing calls as appropriate, and agonistic cries when fighting. Of the varied calls used by the males in the breeding season, the commonest is the song which is sometimes synchronized among several individuals. The males also have a high-pitched copulatory call while the females have a sibilant squeaking solicitation call for copulation.

Interestingly, the acoustic structure of each call has evolved to suit its particular function. For instance, there are two types of warning calls. When a predator is stationary, the mobbing call is loud, repetitive and of varying frequency. This serves to attract neighbours to join the mob. However if the predator is in the air and thus an immediate threat, and bird seeks shelter and emits a call on a constant frequency. Such calls are difficult of location for medium sized birds like hawks or owls. Various species have evolved mobbing and alarm calls with similar acoustic structures, and these are understood and responded to across the species.

The most attractive vocalization are the males' songs during the breeding season. They advertise the male's possession of a breeding territory, in order to attract

females and keep out rival males. Our thrushes have the most melodious songs, for example the ditty of the Shama. There is enough variation within such a song for Shamas to know their neighbours individually.

A remarkable instance of the use of calls for individual recognition and localization is furnished by some scimitar babblers. Pairs keep in touch through duets: the male's flute-like call is answered so promptly by the female that the whole duet sounds as if sung by a single individual.

Finally, we must mention the two famous Indian mimics, the hill myna has a fantastic repertoire of whistles, wails, shrieks, gurgles, groans, and squeaks. Each individual uses 3 to 13 such calls, none of which are shared with its mate, but many of which are shared with its neighbours.

However, the hill myna never imitates other species in the wild. That is a speciality of the racket-tailed drongo and the green magpie of the eastern Himalayas. The drongo, apart from its own rich repertoire, mimics the calls and even the complete songs of other species ranging from the serpent eagle, grey jungle cock, koel, black woodpecker, grey hornbill, scimitar babbler to the shama. The imitations are sometimes echoed right after the original call, and nobody has the faintest notion why the bird indulges in this fantastic performance.

Flight direction by large flocks:

There are few more thrilling sights for the bird watcher than to witness the way large flocks of birds ~~seeing~~ from one direction to another all in perfect unison. Little stints are particularly adept in this manoeuvre, and our readers have commented on this phenomenon. Shri Harikant Singh has sent this interesting piece from Dic Wett.B.

Direction change in flight: This piece sent by Harikant Singh is from Dic Wett B.

For many years scientists have been baffled by the ability of huge flocks of birds rapidly to change direction of flight at the same time. Thousands of starlings, for example, flying in a formation are known to be able to

complete this astounding flight manoeuvre within just five milliseconds.

Scientists now know that acoustic signals would take too long and that visual signals can also be ruled out because a leader bird cannot be seen by all the others all the time.

Biophysicists think that electromagnetic signals may be the key to the precise coordination of the flight manoeuvres. Electromagnetic signals, which are emitted at almost the speed of light, could reach all the birds in a flock simultaneously, regardless of position.

Such electromagnetic signals have been detected in the case of flocks of birds. They result from the electrostatic charging of the body's surface during flight and are also known to exist in the case of insects.

Zoologist Ulrich Warnke from the University of Saarbrücken, has proved this via oscillographic measurement of flocks of birds in flight. However, he has not been able to know how the birds 'decode' the signals which trigger a change of flight direction.

At the moment this is no more than a well-founded hypothesis. The first computer calculations appear to corroborate Warnke's theory.

Waterfowl Census in Bangalore by S. Subramanya, Dept. of Entomology, Univ. of Agricultural Sciences, G.K.V.K. Campus, Bangalore 560 065: Responding to the call given by Mr. S.A. Hussain (NLBW; Sept-Oct 1986 issue) a small group of birdwatchers in Bangalore set out to count birds in four tanks for the 'Asian Midwinter Waterfowl Census'. Tanks selected for the purpose were the Tailur, Lalbagh, Yelahanka and Jakkur tanks. Of these the last three within the city limits of Bangalore, while Tailur tank is about 150 km away from Bangalore, located about 5 km from Maddur town on the Bangalore-Mysore highway. Tailur tank was censused on 11th January; Lalbagh tank on 17th and the remaining two on 18th January 1987.

With the exception of Lalbagh tank which is part of a recreational park in the heart of Bangalore, the

other tanks are village irrigation tanks. Farmers from nearby villages tap water from these tanks to irrigate their paddy and sugarcane crops. These tanks are fed during monsoon rains and they go dry during very dry summers. Lalbagh tank is a perennial tank. These irrigation tanks can be visualised as shallow water basins with the deepest water zone lying close to the elevated main bund. The water depth gets shallower as one moves away from the bund towards the farthest end of the tank. In these tanks the shallow water zones close to the margins are evergrown with emergent grass, which at Tailur tank offered refuge to most of the spotted sandpipers (Tringa glareola) and snipes (Capella spp.), hence we were unable to get an accurate estimate for these species. In addition to this, a long stretch of dense bulrush stand is present along the Northern border of Tailur tank and we made no effort to flush any birds lurking in this stand of reeds.

For counting the birds at Tailur tank we camped there overnight. We spent a good part of the night star-watching and started the census at daybreak. Other tanks were reached on the mornings of censusing. Several binoculars and 20x - 60x zoom telescope were used, for counting the birds.

At Tailur tank we counted 34 species of birds, while the counts for other tank were: 6 for Lalbagh, 16 for Yelahanke and 23 for Jakkur tank. (In and around Tailur tank we observed over 70 species of birds during the day. This is a large number for any place close to Bangalore). Lalbagh and Yelahanke tanks suffer not only quite an amount of disturbance by way of increased human activity, but also pollution because of the inflow of industrial and city effluents.

The highlights of the census were, the sighting of wigeons, common pochards, barheaded geese and a pure flock of blacktailed godwits at Tailur tank, and a pair of white storks, and a pure flock of snipes (Capella spp.) at Jakkur tank. The details of the bird counts is presented in the following Table.

Sl. No.	Species	Number of Birds			
		Tailur	Lalbagh	Yelahanka	Jakkur
1.	Dabchick	10	6	-	-
2.	Spotbilled pelican	1	-	-	-
3.	Little cormorant	87	-	-	-
4.	Grey heron	5	-	-	-
5.	Purple Heron	9	-	-	-
6.	Pond Heron	37	7	15	39
7.	Cattle Egret	56	-	3	63
8.	Large Egret	8	-	2	-
9.	Smaller Egret	13	-	4	1
10.	Little Egret	23	-	22	47
11.	Painted stork	4	-	-	-
12.	Open billed stork	13	-	-	-
13.	Whitenecked stork	5	-	-	-
14.	White stork	-	-	-	2
15.	White ibis	15	-	-	1
16.	Black ibis	39	-	-	-
17.	Spoonbill	-	-	-	1
18.	Barheaded Goose	11	-	-	-
19.	Pintail	110	-	1	343*
20.	Spotbilled duck	5	-	-	1 (dead)
21.	Wigeon	976	-	-	-
22.	Garganey	247	88	80	77*
23.	Shoveller	13	-	-	6
24.	Common pochard	110	-	-	-
25.	Cotton teal	143	-	1	-
26.	Purple moorhen	-	5	-	-
27.	Coot	33	14	-	-
28.	Indian moorhen	-	2	-	-
29.	Pheasant-tailed Jacana	4	-	-	-
30.	Blackwinged stilt	37	-	61	87
31.	Redwattled lapwing	2	-	-	4
32.	Littleringed plover	-	-	-	75
33.	Blacktailed Godwit	240	-	-	-
34.	Common Redshank	-	-	4	-
35.	Marsh sandpiper	-	-	1	19
36.	Greenshank	-	-	5	65
37.	Green sandpiper	25	-	2	18
38.	Spotted sandpiper	6+	-	5	41
39.	Common sandpiper	7	-	1	9
40.	Snipes (<u>Capella</u> spp.)	5+	-	-	47

41. Stints(<u>Calidris</u> spp.)	80	-	17	47
42. Ruff	-	-	-	20
43. Indian whiskered tern	2	-	-	-
44. Brownheaded gull	-	-	-	1

* a flock of 100 pintails + garganeys were seen flying out of the tank.

Four of us, myself, B.K.Chakrapani, O.C.Naveein and M.B.Krishna took charge of counting at the tanks and six others namely, N.Srinivasan, R.Vasuden, Karthik, V.Harish Kumar, V.Ashok and A.K.Raju assisted us in checking the species totals. Dr.Joseph George was overall incharge of the census and he was our 'Field Director'. Our editor Mr.Zafer Futehally joined us for the counts at Yelehanke and Jakkur tanks on 18th January.

Tailur tank in March:

When we wound-up the census on 11th January, (NLBW: March-April 1987 issue) we wondered as to what would Tailur tank have in store for us when the water level got shallower. Expecting a lot of waders, we had decided to visit the tank again in March. Indeed, on March 8th, we were amply rewarded with a tally of 27 species of aquatic birds. The surprise bonanza of the outing was a congregation of over 700 Blacktailed Godwits and about 80 shovellers in full breeding plumage. Considering their rarity in these parts down South, their numbers were quite unexpected.

The watered area in the tank had shrunk almost to half of what it was on 11th January. Besides, the water depth was no more than 20-25 cms. The submerged tank bed was thickly covered with Hydrille and Cabomba spp.

Godwits and stilts were probing deep into the wet tank bed with their beaks and we could see a few shovellers 'shovelling' in the shallow stretches of the tank. However, the majority of shovellers appeared to be spending the last of their halcyon days here in South simply floating around with their beaks neatly tucked in their backs.

The Garganeys too were in their breeding dress. But unlike the shovellers most of them were busy moving about. I noticed two males stretching their neck up a

little and bending backwards till the head was resting on the back with the beak pointing skywards. This behaviour was performed very rapidly and in both cases a female was in front of the male.

Back at my University, a book on waterfowl behaviour by Paul A. Johnsguard (1965. Handbook of Waterfowl Behaviour. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, New York p.37B) labels the behaviour I observed as 'Laying-the head-back-display', recorded as one of the several garganey courtship or sexual displays by Konrad Lorenz during 1951-53.

If what Johnsguard says is true, the male teals I observed were indeed courting the females. This means, these teals start their courtship rituals right here in their wintering grounds well before they fly North towards their breeding grounds! Is it really so? I would be really glad if other birdwatchers elsewhere can confirm my observations.

Some of the other species we sighted at the tank were stints sandpipers (common, green and marsh), greenshanks, whiskered and river terns, brownheaded gull, all the four species of egrets, grey herons, cotton teals, cormorants (little and the shag), black and white ibises and spoon-bills. There were also a good number of greyheaded yellow wagtails and a few yellow headed wagtails foraging at the water edge and on mud-flats and grassy meadows.

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Painted storks of Kokre-Bellur by S.Rangaswami and Dr.(Mrs.)Radha Ramesh: We were at Kokre-Bellur for three hours from 2.30 pm to 5.30 pm on 15 February 1987. Our earlier enquiries about the avian visitors to this place confirmed that they had arrived in large numbers. So we decided to make a detour shortly before nearing the bypass road about 15 km ahead of Channapatna on our way from Mysore to Bangalore least realising that a veritable feast for our eyes was in store at this tiny village. Even before reaching Bellur village we found much bird activity in the vast water-spread a couple of kms to our left known as the Sulekere tank. Dozens and dozens of painted storks and a few pelicans could be sighted all over the tank with the pelicans swimming about in small groups. The moment we reached the village we could not resist the urge to get down from the car and walk across to the village so as to have a full and clear view of the enormous number

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of painted storks (*Ibis leucocephalus*) and quite a good number of grey (spot-billed) pelicans (*Pelicanus Philippensis*). Almost every tree served as perching ground for not less than twenty to thirty painted storks. Some of the larger trees harboured over thirty painted storks. Some of the larger trees harboured over fifty to sixty of them. The ratio of painted storks to pelicans was about 5:1. Some trees had only pelicans. But a few pelicans could also be seen with the storks in the same tree. Every few minutes forty to fifty storks would take off and hover above and almost an equal number would land flapping their wings noisily. Now and then we could see some birds mating. There were also a few nests in which the parent birds were resting cosily warming the eggs. But it was evident that breeding activity was just commencing. Nearly a hundred storks were soaring and gliding effortlessly and gracefully at heights ranging from about a hundred to two hundred feet. In all, we must have seen during our stay of three hours at the village over one thousand painted storks and about two hundred pelicans. What impressed us most was the confidence the birds seemed to have in their safety at this hamlet, and the admirable coexistence and friendliness between the birds and the human population. Strangely we could see very little of other kinds of birds. A little egret which had intruded appeared ill at ease amidst the preponderance of storks and pelicans. A periah kite, two brahmini kites and a few mynahs alone could be seen in the entire village almost giving the impression that all other birds had abandoned the village either out of discretion or despair.

For more details about these migrant birds and this sleepy but lucky village so readily adopted by them, let us listen to a few authentic voices.

Shri Thammenna Gowda (about 50 years old),
Ex-secretary of Bellur village Co.op. Society says:
'Our village is located about 80 km from Bangalore and comes under Mandya District. The road to our village branches off a little beyond 8 km from Chennapatna to the east of the Bangalore-Mysore road and is about 15 km long. 'Kokre' in Kannada means 'crane' and our village has always been known as Kokre Bellur. I have heard my father and grand-father say that these birds have been coming to our village from times immemorial. Because of the love and respect we have for these birds nobody cuts any trees and nobody kills these birds or even disturbs them in any manner. The birds arrive during October/

November and stay on till June/July during which period they feed on the aquatic fauna found in the Sulekere tank a couple of km away as well as the Tailur tank on the way to the village and Shimsha river - a tributary of the Cauvery. We have a number of trees - none of them very large - like Thespesia, Banyan, Tamarind, Acacias (a variety known locally as Bellary 'Jhali') etc. The birds choose all the trees available without any particular preference. The population of the village may be about 2000 (150 houses) and everyone in the village knows the manurial value of the birds' droppings. We spread red earth beneath the branches so that it can absorb the droppings. This nitrogen-rich soil is carted to the fields and farms when required. But it has to be blended since it is too strong a manure to be used as such. The bird population has been on the increase during the last few years and we are very proud that the birds have accepted our hospitality and brought distinction to our village'.

Forest Watcher Shri Nagappa says: 'I agree with all that Sri Thammaanna Gowda has said. The office of Wild Life Department, Mysore has posted me exclusively for this village to take care of these birds. Only two varieties of migrant birds come here - the painted stock and the spotbilled pelican. During the peak period about 2000 painted storks and 500 to 600 pelicans visit and stay here for breeding. March/April appear the most favoured period for breeding. Some of the eggs and fledgelings are lost at times due to strong gusts of wind and we feel utterly helpless when this happens.'

Mr.P.M.Arye, an Engineer from HAL Bangalore and a freelance photographer was seen totally absorbed in photographing the birds. He kept moving from one vantage point to the other to cover every interesting movement and activity of the birds. He appeared a very reticent person and only with some difficulty could we draw him out to speak to us and share his accumulated knowledge and experience of the village and the birds. He had this to say: 'I have been coming to this village for a number of years and I make several visits each year during this season. I am an amateur photographer and these birds have a strange attraction for me. I hold exhibitions of my photographs occasionally and the storks and pelicans of this village are given some prominence on such occasions. I have taken photographs covering almost every facet of the lives of these birds like courting, mating, nest-building, foraging etc. I have always marvelled at the friendliness

between the local people and the birds. Nowhere can we photograph these birds at such close range - sometimes even less than 15 or 20 feet - and in such large numbers as at this spot'.

The three hours we spent in the company of the painted storks and pelicans of this village will ever remain for us a very memorable experience. We hope we will be able to come to this village often to enjoy their freshening company at such close proximity and also come better equipped to make detailed notes and take photographs depicting their behaviour in all its infinite variety.

An article of this nature will be incomplete if we do not make reference to a very old and venerable looking tamarind tree found in this village. Although bare and bereft of foliage it is tenanted by a dozen painted storks as if to lend some life and colour to a denized of the locality who has outlived its allotted span. There it is standing silently and serenely like a lonely hermit of commanding reverence. Gazing at it one could retrace like an historian its struggles and sufferings, its lean as well as luxurious years and also the attacks withstood, the storms resisted, the heat and cold endured and above all, its will to live. Its trunk, stout and strong but gnarled and twisted, its roots tangled but much of it exposed since much of the earth that nourished them have been washed away, its short and sinewy branches with some foliage here and there to prove that it is yet alive - all these are a standing but mute proof of the sage - like utterances of HERMAN HESSE who says:

'Trees are saencuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.

A tree says: My strength is trust. I know nothing about my fathers. I know nothing about the thousand children that every year spring out of me. I live out the secret of my seed to the very end, and I care for nothing else. I trust the God that is in me. I trust that my labour is holy. Out of this trust I live.'

From -Wanderings-

One feels like thanking the Gods profusely for granting this tamarind tree a safe haven in Bellur village where trees and birds have so far remained unmolested by human rapacity.

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Birds of the Kaveri Valley, by Dr. Eric J. Lott, United Theological College, 17 Millers Road, Bangalore -46:
(Continued.....):

On the river the red-wattled lapwing is another early caller, with its repeated 'Did you do it' that's supposed to be inauspicious to hear. Its cousin, the yellow wattled lapwing may also be not too far away, perhaps on the stony maidan near Bomasandra, much quieter than the red wattled. Then before full light there is the moment of magic - the great dawn chorus of birds all around, with the Magpie robin and Indian robin probably prominent among them.

Another early caller is the Indian Pitta usually close to camp at Galiborei. Its Tamil name 'Six O'clock Bird' is so very appropriate; for some months of the year you can set your watch by its aggressive 'Three Cheers'. With its green and turquoise back with white and black patches built into the wings and back its brownish-orange underparts but for a scarlet bottom and especially its black and white/eyestripe the Pitta is fine company to have hopping briskly about near the camp. Somehow though, it always looks a little surly, and can be quite aggressive with other birds, then resorting to flashing its bright wing-patches and emitting quite an alarmingly harsh hiss.

Far more mild is the white-throated ground thrush, though similarly a very attractive looking bird, with a predominance of orange on front and neck, a grey-blue back and tail, and with striking white and blackish stripes down from its eye-line. By March the thrush moves off, presumably for breeding, though it's only a local migrant. A pity it doesn't sing while it's with us at Galiborei.

By far the finest singer with such rich, rolling lower notes, is the Shama. In spite of all the clearing of bushes and thicket (especially by Tamarind croppers, but also by cattle and goat herdsman who move through this stretch of the valley every day) the Shama is still to be seen and, even more fortunately, to be heard at

Galiborei. In fact, with a modicum of imitative whistling the Shama can be brought quite close with its long, often forked tail flashing its white edges, with fine reddish-orange lower half, very dark-blue head, breast and back, and white rump.

Looking in some ways like a smaller cousin of the Shama, is Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, who is also capable of some fine tin-whistle singing. Six other flycatchers, all beautiful, found at Galiborei are: the Paradise flycatcher, when in its fully mature male plumage, those white ribbons that make up its tail float ethernally as it flits from perch to perch (more common is the female and less mature male with russet-coloured body and tail, and blue-black head with crest). Then there is the black-naped blue Monarch flycatcher rather more shy, though with the same typically herch flycatcher call, 'Weetch, Weetch' and more than once seen with a brood of brown-backed youngsters. There are two kinds of fan-tailed flycatchers: the white-browed and white-throated. Both fascinate with their tail-fanning antics as they search for insects. But the white-browed keeps almost to ground level, and is thus not so easily seen; the white-throated flits about at a higher level, usually in the upper part of bushes or on trees. Then there is the delightful light-blue of the verditer flycatcher, and the pert little red-breasted, usually not found here at Galiborei with much red, being mostly mousey-brown and buff, but with an attractively clear and round eye. The flycatchers in general are a favourite species of mine. A cousin is an oddly big-headed, but still fine-looking bird, the little pied flycatcher-shrike, the male having an impressive black cap and a pink-brown tinge along with its white-with-black colouring.

Real shrikes are also found nearer to Sangam in the scrub: there's the bay-backed, with that rich red-brown back flashing as it flies out for its insect prey, and the larger grey shrike, nicely patterned with black and white along with the grey. The shrikes are not liked much by other small birds: I remember a bay-backed finding its way to our Bangalore compound, and being mobbed furiously and continuously until it left.

Among the most dramatically coloured birds is the black-headed Oriole often very close by at Galiborei. Against a blue sky, or bright-green foliage, its brilliant gold body, with jet-black head and wings, is a wonderful

sight. It can sing quite flutily, but its harsh 'kark, kark', called almost continuously in early spring as it feeds in the trees, sometimes lower on bushes, is not so attractive.

A smaller unrelated version is the Iora, the male's black cap outstanding against its gold, green and white. As its mating flight it ascends some 6 or 8 feet above the top of a tree, puffs itself out and spirals down like a golden ball. Its call is probably as common, and as varied, as any to be heard at Galiborai. Most common is an attractively futey descending scale of 2, 3 or up to 8 notes, the 2-note call sounding just like a boy whistling admiringly at a girl, which may well be what it is trying to do. This is one of those birds adept at hiding itself while calling away with infuriating clarity. Another is the splendid Gold-Mantled chloropsis, mainly leaf-green with purplish throat and fine gold mantle on the male. It has the misleading practice of imitating other birds perfectly.

A family that I ought to have included among the fish-hunters is that of the kingfishers: sometimes the turquoise and orange flash of the little common kingfisher is seen, bulletting along with its tiny little 'scree'. More raucous and large is one of the most common birds of Indian roads, the white-fronted kingfisher, equally brilliantly coloured. But the most strident voiced and most striking in plumage is the stork-billed kingfisher, seen and heard at Galiborai from time to time with its brown head, superb green and turquoise black, orange front, white neck and massive bright red bill.

Some would say that the most attractive of them all is the pied kingfisher, often seen in pairs like a couple of pointers quartering the river, hunting for their quarry, every now and then hovering stationary as they examine some shadow in the water, then diving almost vertically and with incredible speed right down into the water then on the move again if the fish has been missed. Incidentally one of the mysteries of nature is how those diving birds, unless from directly above, can adjust their aim to the water's refraction.

Out on the rocks, further upstream, along with the red-wattled lapwings we can sometimes see the delightful little pratincole, long-winged, very short-legged, fork-tailed, just like a biggish swallow when it flies in search of insects. Out there on the rocks there may also

be the large pied wagtail, 'weatching' and singing away in its high-pitched voice above the sound of the water, tail awagging all the time. Then there are the river and black-bellied terns, rather like the pied kingfishers on the move up and down stream continually in search of small fish, large insects and such-like near the surface. They too dive down for their prey, and sometimes submerge themselves.

As we look out across the river, quite often we can see the maroon-backed imperial pigeon flying from our side into the trees on the other side, or perhaps the reverse. Its moaning call is strangely human. The equally odd warbling whistle of the green pigeon is less common, probably because nowadays there are so many fewer indigenous fruit-bearing trees. The green pigeon is another skillful hider. In the nearby scrub there is still an abundance of little brown and spotted doves.

Another aboreal family with a give-away sound is the woodpecker family, with their variety of 'tap taps'. We have two kinds of golden-backed, both red-headed but the 'larger' has also a red rump.

Then there is the little Mahratta, black, white and red and sometimes we see the tiny brown-crowned pygmy woodpecker, hanging like an iora or tit upside down, tapping away on quite a small outer branch. Related to the woodpeckers there is the green barbet, with its oft-repeated 'ka-roo, ka-roo' that also needs a slightly decayed old tree for boring out its nest, as does the Coppersmith, or crimson-throated barbet. The hoopoe too is usually nearby, with its 'hoop, hoop, hoop' brightly striped black and white wing patterns and crest flicking up impressively when probing the ground with its long curved back, or alarmed on a branch.

The cuckoo family too is well represented. The usually quiet small green-billed malkoha (not really so small) is surprisingly common, with its oily-bluegreen plumage, its white-striped tail, and white-blue bare skin around the eye, an invariable skulker like its cousin the better-known coucal or crow-pheasant. The coucal's red eye russet wings, black body and sinister honk, honk from the middle of a thicket, all give some indication of its vivious ways with the nests of smaller birds. Watching a blue bearded bee-eater feeding its young (in the Palni hills) recently I saw a coucal not only try to get at the

young bee-eaters (impossible down their long earth tunnel) but also attack a family of your painted bush quail.

Less unpleasant is the Indian Cuckoo, though parasitic with its eggs, as most cuckoos. Its quite musical 4-note call, 'what's your trouble', is often heard in the valley, and carries for 500 yards or more. More rare, but to be seen, is the pied crested cuckoo, with its 3-note 'pee, pee, pee'. And anyone who has camped at Galiborei in spring on a moonlit night will not need reminding of the call of the Hawk Cuckoo, 'brain-fever, brain-fever', repeated on a rising note ad nauseam and with increasing fervour perhaps all through the night. In daylight too this cuckoo might be very close to camp and quite unafraid.

I have written nothing about the sunbirds, the munias, the babblers (especially the scimitar, with remarkable male-female synchronised call), the warblers, the two types of night-jar that fill the night air with their 'chuck, chuck', 'tonk, tonk', and other mysterious sounds, the splendid little barred forest owlet, sometimes flying from tree to tree quite close to camp, the blossom-headed parakeet, the white-eyes, the bulbuls, the drongos, the tree-pies, the huge-billed, clumsy-flying grey hornbill, the prettily coloured little minivet, and so many more. I trust that I have at least given some taste of this rich experience of 'birding' in the Kaveri valley. If only this valley is preserved, or, better, reforested.....! For, each year now there are a few birds less.

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A Grebe in the hand by Thomas Gay, 122/4-A, Erandavana, Pune: Confessing our inferiority to the uniquely ever-green Salim Ali, most of us octogenarians feel obliged to restrict our bird-watching to arm-chair studies and the mists of memory. Fortunate indeed are those who (unlike me, alas!) possess a verandah looking on to a quiet tree-shaded garden. Understanding my limitations, our sympathetic Editor has invited me to dig into the past.

In an active bird-watching (and sometimes, I fear, bird-shooting) life of many decades, I have missed many of the wonderful experiences which we read about in every issue of the Newsletter. But I can claim one experience

which is not likely to have been shared by any of my fellow readers: the voluntary surrender to my hand of a wild great crested grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*).

To be candid, I must admit that the grebe was perhaps two minutes old.

I spent the early nineteen-twenties at a famous Public School above the city of Bristol, in the West of England. On Sundays and other holidays during the summer term, those of us who held the right views about Nature Study used to cycle far afield into the green countryside of Somerset, after crossing the Avon Gorge by the graceful suspension bridge (a marvellous place for indulging in the strictly forbidden sport of dropping big stones into the river three hundred feet below).

One of our haunts was Blagdon lake, a large and unspoilt expanse of water which the imaginative councillors of Bristol had constructed for their water supply. Along one side, the lake was bordered by reed beds which the lake's population of coots considered an admirable site for nest-building; so did a few moorhens and dabchicks, and at least one pair of great crested grebes.

On the day when I and another boy found this prize, one of the two white eggs must have just hatched, for a delightful little chick with black and white longitudinal stripes was shuffling about on the rim of the nest, while a parent bird swam to and fro, some twenty yards away, calling hysterically.

Something made me place my cupped hand just where one side of the bulky, weed-built nest rose from the water, and the little fellow scrambled down the slope and crept into my hand. I held it lovingly for a moment or two, and then replaced it in the nest, after which we two boys slunk away, leaving the baby grebe to its frantic parent.

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Correspondence:

Comments on the January-February 1987 issue by Mr.
Mr.V.Shantharam, 68, 1 Floor, Santhome High Road, Madras-28:
The January/February 1987 issue of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers was most absorbing. There were a number of

interesting observations reported in this number and I would like to add some more to these.

I am grateful to M/s.B.M.Parasharya and Abdul Jamil Urfi for more details on the floating ability of herons and the common crow. I was particularly surprised to read about the floating ability of the crow as I have an observation of a crow getting drowned. This incident took place on 29.4.84 at the Adyar Estuary. A crow (*Corvus splendens*, I think), was engaged in chasing and attacking in flight a pair redwattled lapwings, having a nest on the small islet in the river. Suddenly, to our surprise, we found the crow losing control and splashing into the water. It struggled and kept calling for quite some time, trying its best to take off from the water. It was seen drifting for a while before finally drowning in the river.

With reference to A.Z.Babi's note on the feeding behaviour of redwattled lapwing, I would like to point out that the little ringed plover (*Charadrius dubius*) is well known for its behaviour of tapping the ground to flush out insects. The 'Handbook' has the following to say on this behaviour, 'Has a clever technique of stampeding tiny insects and crustaceans lying doggo in unevennesses of the ground by drumming or tapping with the toes of one foot in a rapid vibratory motion. Success of this manoeuvre evident from the frequency of the darting forward 'dips' to snatch the fleeing refugees, immediately resulting'. This method of feeding appears to be widespread among the other members of the genus Charadrins also. Lapwings belong to the same family as the little ringed plover but I am not sure if this behaviour has been reported in lapwings earlier.

Incidentally, I have also observed the use of feet in stirring while feeding by little egrets on several occasions and more details on this behaviour is reported in the 'Herons Handbook' by James Hancock and James Kushlan. To quote: 'use of the feet while feeding is common in some species and has been reported sporadically in many others. Foot movement behaviours that have been described include, Foot Stirring in which the foot and legs are vibrated, Foot Raking in which the toes are scratched across the substrate, Foot Probing in which toes are inserted into the substrate, and Foot Paddling in which the feet are moved up and down on the substrate. Several of the species that frequently use foot stirring behaviour, such as snowy and little egrets and black

herons, have feet that are more brightly coloured than their legs. This suggests that the flit movement is used to startle prey and cause them to move. Foot movements are often used in mud or vegetation'.

With reverence to the note 'Do birds Play', I have to report an interesting observation which could also be, perhaps, classified under 'play behaviour'. This observation was made at the Vedanthangal Bird Sanctuary on 23rd March 1985. We were observing a group of about 80-100 shags (*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*) swimming in the water. This group consisted mostly of adult birds in breeding plumage and few sub-adults and non-breeding individuals. The birds, we thought at first, were feeding but on close observation we found they were not feeding but apparently playing. The birds kept diving under water every now and then and emerged with a leaf or a twig (some were 4-5 inches in length). This was tossed about for a few seconds, as the bird kept swimming. After some time, the bird would lose interest and discard the material. At times a bird would snatch its neighbour's twig or leaf. All the birds took part in this activity at one time or other. After a few minutes, some of the birds in the group would take off but soon another set of birds would join and the activity continued.

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Extract of a letter from S.K.Reeves, 6 Town Close, Hatt, Norfolk, England: We had one very cold spell this winter, with quite a lot of snow. It drove most of the duck of the local marshes further South and inland, but numbers have built up again very well. We now have a large population of Vigeon, Teal and Pintail with other species in smaller numbers.

There are numbers of pink-footed and white-fronted geese and a few bean geese present, but the brent geese are here in vast numbers.

It is remarkable how the pattern of winter visitors can vary so widely at times. This winter, for example, there is hardly a Fieldfare or Redwing to be seen and yet in other years they are abundant. The snow buntings and lapland buntings are conspicuous by their scarcity.

Great excitement has been caused by the visit to Norfolk and Suffolk of one or two small parties of Great Bustards; driven here by the severe weather from

the Continent. It has been speculated that they have come from the Polish and East German populations.

Any day now, we shall be seeing our first Anocets. Breeding populations have built up nicely at suitable places along the Suffolk and Norfolk coasts. It has been interesting to observe how, during the past forty years, as the breeding population grew at Havergate Island in Suffolk, where the birds first came back to this country after an absence of more than a century, they have been steadily pushed further and further North up the Coasts of Suffolk and Norfolk.

Hen Harriers, sparrow hawks and Malim are well represented this winter.

There have been a few arties of roaming waxwings about. We had the pleasure of sitting in a friends drawing room and watching one feeding in Cotoneaster tree in her front garden.

One or two Glaucous Gulls are to be seen along the coast. They are winter visitors which sometimes appear as early as August.

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A Visit to Rajasthan - Extract from Mr. Nazir Latif's letter dt. 24.1.87: 'During a recent visit to Rajasthan I discovered that rather wrong-headedly, the Government, as also in Andhra Pradesh, has prohibited the shooting of all birds in the name of conservation.

Yet partridge for instance I am told, is freely sold by trappers in the market.

We saw a lot of partridge, mostly grey, within a few miles of the city. The black variety was rather more scarce. There were also a very large number of quail of various kinds which I couldn't identify separately, but some were much larger than others. There were also in some areas, fairly numerous sand grouse and also the odd here. There were thousands of duck in the ghazals around Jaipur and also plenty of geese, both grey legs and bar-headed. The ghazals had become quite small as a result of lack of rains and the concentration of birds was quite heavy.

One thing which I learnt about bird habits was that in Rajasthan, and also, I was told, in Harayana, grey partridge roost in trees, although as elsewhere, it nests on the ground. It is amazing how skilfully a partridge can hide itself in a kiker tree - which to look at, one would think could hide nothing - and will only emerge when clods of earth are thrown into the tree. As far as I know, partridge in Hyderabad at least, do not roost or hide in trees'.

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Participation in Midwinter waterfall census by Dr.J.C.Uttengi, 56/1 Mission Compound, Dharwad - 580 001: Indeed, my acceptance to participate in the recent Asian-water-fowl census work, called by the International Water-fowl Research Bureau (IWRB) through the BNHS, Bombay in January 1987 mid-winter time has paid rich dividends to me as it reinforced lot of new knowledge and 1st hand experience in the field identification of rare migrating species of water and Marsh-birds, an excellent opportunity for birders and I think that if any one has for any reason missed the opportunity, he or she, has really missed a great one. As scheduled, our van reached the first appointed water-habitat Heggeri tank, near Haveri about 8.30 am on the 11th January. We were surprised to see that, not a single member of the family 'Rallidae' were visible. This was obviously due to the fact that this tank having a water-spread area of more than 217 acres had over-flown recently in November-December 1986 rains and all the natural floating vegetation had got washed off. We saw 2 pond herons (Ardea greyii) at one end and together with them we found two large egrets (Ardea - alba) feeding near the water. A single little egret was gaping. After a while 4 painted storks (Mycteria leucocephala) arrived. It was a sight to see them on their wings. Towards the far end as we walked along the bank, we saw 6 white necked storks (Ciconia episcopus) and 5 black ibis (Pseudibis - papillosa). At about 9.30 am as the heat of the sun was increasing, we saw 3 small flocks of Barheaded goose (Anser-Indicus) returning and they landed right in the middle of the open tank but within the reach of our Binocular. They numbered in all about 95 individuals. To see them sailing on the clear water surface was a beauty. The common teals (Anas crecca) about 15 of them were however discovered moving in the very vicinity of these geese. But one of the most spectacular moment was the arrival of the Demoiselle crane

(Anthropoides Virgo) at about 10-45. They landed far away into the disappearing banks of this very large tank. They were estimated approximately in the vicinity of 1500 and odd birds. The characteristic kurr-kurr call of these birds is amazing and the local people call them in their vernacular tongue as Kerkoncha. No waders worth mentioning were discernible over here on that day except 2 black-winged stilts (Himantopus-himantopus) near the mouth of the nalla entering this tank. We left this place at 11 am and reached another tank 10 kilometers from this tank, called the Naregal tank at 11.15 am and to our surprise saw the entire tank flooded with birds. There were 800 coots (Fulica atra) 85 purple moorhen in the grass (Porphyrio porphyrio) 25 cotton teals (Nettapus coromendelianus) 15 garganey (Anas querquedula) 10 Gad wall (Anas strepera) 30 spot-billed ducks (Anas poecilorhynchos); about 150 members of the common teal (Anas crecca) 80 barheaded goose (Anser indicus) and plus 4 white ibis (Threskiornis aethiopica) 4 white necked storks (Ciconia episcopus) 2 open billed storks (Anastomus Oscitans) and also 4 little egrets, 5 large egrets and 40 cattle egrets. The population size of water-fowls in this habitat is indicative of its productivity and natural suitability for resting a feeding and sheltering with the submerged grass and lotus in the waters. If rehabilitated with scrub trees all around the tank, it can be an ideal wet-land spot that can attract many more migratory and resident migratory species.

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XX INTERNATIONAL ORNITHOLOGICAL CONGRESS 1990

Preliminary Notice No.1

The XX International Ornithological Congress will take place in Christchurch, New Zealand, from 2-9 December 1990. Professor Charles G.Sibley (USA) is President and Dr.Ben D.Bell(NZ) is Secretary-General. The anticipated Congress programme will include plenary lectures, symposia, contributed papers (spoken and posters), workshops, discussion groups and films. There will be a mid-Congress excursion day. Pre- and post-Congress excursions are planned to interesting ornithological sites in New Zealand and adjacent regions. Requests for the First Circular and suggestions regarding Congress organisation should be addressed to:

DR BEN D. BELL
Secretary-General
XX International Ornithological Congress
Department of Zoology
Victoria University of Wellington
Private Bag, Wellington
NEW ZEALAND

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मध्यप्रदेश में कृषि सुविधाओं का विस्तार

मध्यप्रदेश में सूखी खेती के वैज्ञानिक तरीके से किसानों को प्रशिक्षण भूमि के लिए प्रदेश में बड़े पैमाने पर वैज्ञानिक ढंग से जल प्रबंध। भारी काली जमीन पर सूखी से संबंधित अनुसंधान और प्रदर्शन के लिए एक मार्ग दर्शी योजना।

राष्ट्रीयकृत बैंकों और सहकारी संस्थाओं के खास किसानों को सभी जरूरी चीजें जैसे, बीज, खाद, कीटनाशक इत्यादि और आवश्यक धनराशि की व्यवस्था। छोटे और सीमांत किसानों, हरिजन आदिवासी और अन्य पिछड़े वर्गों के लिए खास सुविधाएं। छोटे और सीमांत किसानों को संसाधनों और विकास कार्यों के लिए प्रति विकास खंड पांच लाख रुपये की राशि सुलभ।

उन्नत किस्म के सुधरे हुये बीजों का उपयोग, इस साल लगभग पचपन लाख हेक्टेयर के क्षेत्र में गेहूं - धान - ज्वार - बाजरा और मक्का की उन्नत किस्म की खेती।

राज्य में मिट्टी का वैज्ञानिक परीक्षण, उपयुक्त पसल का चुनाव। किसानों को सलाह के लिए चलती फिरती प्रयोग शलाएं एवं भूमि सुधार के कार्यक्रम।

अन्तर्वर्तीय और शिक्षित खेती पर बल। किसानों को एक से अधिक फसलों का लाभ। साठ लाख की ओते छोटे और सीमान्त किसानों के हाथ।

सिंचित क्षेत्रों में रासायनिक उर्वरकों के समुचित उपयोग। प्रदेश में साढ़े दस हजार उर्वरक वितरण केन्द्र।

प्रदेश में वैज्ञानिक विधि से फसलों की सुरक्षा। पौध संरक्षण कार्यक्रम खरीफ मौसम के दौरान प्रदेश के कोने-कोने तक ढाई हजार मीटरिकटन कीटनाशकों की व्यवस्था।

प्रदेश में राष्ट्रीय तिलहन विकास परियोजना, दलहन विकास, कार्यक्रम, विशेष धान उत्पादक किसानों की आर्थिक सुरक्षा के लिए फसल बीमा योजना। प्रदेश में कृषि विभाग द्वारा छोटे सिंचाई साधनों के विकास पर विशेष ध्यान।

किसानों की प्रगति में योजना बद्ध तरीके से कटिबद्ध मध्यप्रदेश सरकार।